

**THE KING AND HIS KINGDOM, PART 13: “THE MOST IMPORTANT CHOICE YOU’LL EVER  
MAKE”  
MATTHEW 7:13-29**

### Personal Introduction

Hi everyone!

If you don’t know me, my name is Eric and I’m a pastor here, and it’s my privilege to preach the Word of God for us today.

### Sermon Series Introduction

We’re currently in Part 13 of our sermon series called “The King and His Kingdom,” where we’re going through the Gospel of Matthew together.

And today’s sermon is titled: “The Most Important Choice You’ll Ever Make.”

So let’s get right into it.

### Sermon Introduction

The average adult makes about 35,000 conscious choices a day.<sup>1</sup>

- What will I eat?
- What will I wear?
- What will I say?
- How will I say it?
- What will I work on?
- When will I leave?
- When will I sleep?

We are constantly bombarded with decisions that need to be made—and we’re frankly tired of so many choices.

Amidst all these everyday decisions that vie for our attention, we don’t want to have to make one more choice.

And so, the most important choice we’ll ever make gets pushed into the background.

It doesn’t necessarily grab our attention or feel particularly urgent, but in a very real way, this choice will change our lives forever.

What is that choice?

Whether or not we will follow Jesus as his disciple forever in the fellowship of his church.

For some of us, perhaps we *have* made that choice—and we’ve gone public with it in our baptism, and we continue to reaffirm it in taking the Lord’s Supper.

But even still, Jesus never wants us to take that choice for granted—or to assume it. He calls us to regular self-examination to ensure that we’re continuing to choose him every day of our lives—and that we aren’t being deceived by others or even ourselves.

For others of us, perhaps we *haven’t yet* made that choice to follow Jesus. And so, he implores you to not just listen on the sidelines but to make a definitive choice. Jesus is either who he says he is and has done what he says he has done and will do what he says he will do—or he’s a fraud. He doesn’t leave anyone to simply admire him or neglect him. His words and his life demand a decision.

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<sup>1</sup> Renée Onque, “The average adult makes 35,000 decisions a day: Here’s how to avoid ‘choice overload,’ from the authors of ‘Out of Your Mind,’” February 20, 2025, <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/02/20/adults-makes-35000-decisions-a-day-how-to-avoid-choice-overload.html>.

How we respond to Jesus and his words is the most important choice we'll ever make.

The rest of our lives and where we spend eternity hinges on that one choice.

And that's what we'll look at more today.

### Scripture Introduction

Turn your Bibles to Matthew 7:13-29.

I'd encourage you to keep your Bibles open and follow along with the verses as they come up throughout the sermon. It will help you follow much more easily.

I'd highly recommend using a physical Bible, but if you don't have one, you can download the ESV Bible app, or just ask someone next to you, and I'm sure they'd be happy to share with you.

<pause>

We're currently at the end of what's known as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which spans from chapters 5-7.

So far, Jesus has shared...

- the *character* and *effects* of his disciples in the world (5:3-16),
- and how they are to have a righteousness that *exceeds* that of the religious leaders in terms of having a *heart-obedience* to God's law (5:17-48).

And then, he describes what that heart-obedience *shouldn't* and *should* look like in various contexts.

- In relation to *religious practices*, like giving, prayer, and fasting, their righteous acts *shouldn't* be to please *themselves* but *should* be to please their *Father* in heaven (6:1-18);
- In relation to *everyday life*, they *shouldn't* treasure or be anxious about things in the world but *should* trust their Father in heaven, seeking *his* kingdom and *his* righteousness (6:19-34).
- In relation to *others*, they *shouldn't* be judgmental but *should* be discerning, dependent, and loving (7:1-12).

And now, Jesus *concludes* his sermon by *confronting* his hearers.

In effect, he's saying, "This is what it *truly* means to follow me—to be my *disciple*, to be a citizen in my *kingdom*.<sup>2</sup> So what are you going to do about it?"<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> R. T. France (*Matthew*, TNTC [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008]) writes: "The theme of this, Matthew's longest and most wide-ranging collection of Jesus' teaching, is indicated by the stated audience (see on 5:1–2); it deals with the character, duties, attitudes and dangers of the Christian disciple. It is a manifesto setting out the nature of life in the kingdom of heaven. The Sermon thus makes no claim to present an ethic for all men; indeed much of it would make no sense as a universal code. It is concerned not with ethics in general, but with discipleship, with man in his obedience and devotion to God, not with a pattern for society. To interpret it legalistically as a set of rules is to miss the point; it represents a demand more radical than any legislator could conceive, going far beyond what human nature can meet, a demand for perfection (5:48). And central to it is the person of Jesus himself: for his sake the disciples are to be persecuted (5:11); he sets before them his own interpretation of the will of God (5:17–48: 'I say to you ...'); their eternal destiny depends on their relation to him (7:21–23) and their response to his teaching (7:24–27). The Sermon is thus far from being just a collection of moral precepts. It presents the radical demand of Jesus the Messiah on all who respond to his preaching of God's kingdom. 'The Sermon on the Mount compels us, in the first place, to ask who he is who utters these words.'"

<sup>3</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* [London: IVP, 1972], 2:218-219) writes: "'There', He says in effect, 'is the character of this kingdom which I am forming. That is the type of life I am going to give you, and I want you to live and manifest it.' He has not only laid down principles; He has worked them out for us in detail. Now, having done that, He pauses, as it were, and looks at His congregation and says, 'Well now; there is My purpose. What are you going to do about it? There is no point in listening to this Sermon, there is no purpose in your having followed Me through all this delineation of the Christian life, if you are only going to listen. What are you going to do about it?' He comes, in other words, to exhortation, to application. Here once more we are reminded that our Lord's method must ever be the pattern and example for all preaching. That is not true preaching which fails to apply its message and its truth; nor true exposition of the Bible that is simply content to open up a passage and then stop. The truth has to be taken into the life, and it has to be lived. Exhortation and application are essential parts of preaching. We see our Lord doing that very thing here. The remainder of this seventh chapter is nothing but a great and grand application of the message of the Sermon on the Mount to the people who first heard it, and to all of us at all times who claim to be Christian. So He proceeds now to test His listeners. He says, in effect, 'My Sermon is finished. Now at once you must ask yourselves a question, "What am I doing about this? What is my reaction? Am I to be content to fold my arms and say with so many that it is a marvellous Sermon, that it has the grandest conception of life and living that mankind has ever known—such exalted morality, such wonderful uplift—that it is the ideal life that all ought to live?" ' The same applies to

And that's where we are as we dive into today's passage.

### Scripture Reading

Let's read Matthew 7:13-29.

<sup>13</sup> "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. <sup>14</sup> For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

<sup>15</sup> "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup> You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

<sup>21</sup> "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup> On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' <sup>23</sup> And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

<sup>24</sup> "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. <sup>26</sup> And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. <sup>27</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

<sup>28</sup> And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, <sup>29</sup> for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

This is God's Word.

### Overview

We'll look at this passage in four parts, where we see Jesus giving...

Four exhortations [or appeals]:

- I. Enter by the narrow gate (vv. 13-14)
- II. Beware of false teachers (vv. 15-20)
- III. Beware of self-deception (vv. 21-23)
- IV. Build on the right foundation (vv. 24-29)

#### I. Enter by the narrow gate (vv. 13-14)

Look at verses 13-14.

[<sup>13</sup> "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. <sup>14</sup> For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.]

Here, Jesus uses a metaphor of two gates to describe the *choice* that needs to be made.

Notice, there are *only* two options. There's no middle option, and there are not many ways. The choice is *binary*.

And then, he gives *four contrasts* between these two gates.

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us. Is that our reaction? Just to praise the Sermon on the Mount? If it is, according to our Lord, He might as well never have preached it. It is not praise He desires; it is practice. The Sermon on the Mount is not to be commended, it is to be carried out."

First, one gate is *wide*, so you don't need to leave anything behind. Take all the luggage you want. Take all your sins, take all your selfish ambitions, take all your treasures on earth. There's nothing you can't take with you through the wide gate.

But the other gate is *narrow*. Imagine a turnstile at an MRT station, where only one person can enter at a time. You can't take any luggage with you. You must leave behind your sins, your selfish ambitions, your treasures on earth. You can't take any of it with you. There's simply no room for it.

Jesus is so kind in letting us know this upfront.

He doesn't try to trick you into following him. He doesn't pull a bait-and-switch by saying that the gate is wide, and then, once you enter, start narrowing the path.

But from the *beginning*, he lets us know that there's a *cost* to following him (Luke 14:25-33)—and he wants us to count that cost before we choose to be his disciple.

To be clear, we cannot *earn* entrance into the kingdom of God—Christ alone has paid our admission fee. There is no entrance *fee*, but there is a kind of sunk cost—all that we must leave behind.

And perhaps the hardest to leave behind is not particular things or even people, but it's our old selves. Pride clings to us, and self-centeredness doesn't let go easily.

But Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 16:24-25).

You cannot take your old life with you.<sup>4</sup>

In a word, this is repentance.

We turn away and leave behind who we once were and all we once thought we had apart from Christ, and we walk through the narrow gate, saying with the apostle Paul, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:8).

<pause>

Second, the *wide* gate is the *easy* way. You can do whatever you want on that path—and others can do whatever they want. There's much room for inclusivity. It's the path of "you do you" and "I'll do me." There's no sacrifice required. There's no persecution expected.

But the *narrow* gate is the *hard* way. You cannot do whatever you want, but there are God's standards that must not be violated. There is a clear dividing line between those who are on the narrow path and those who are not. It's the path of denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following Jesus. Sacrifice is required. Persecution is expected.

And notice, it doesn't start narrow and then later widen, but it's narrow at the *gate* and it's narrow *all the way* through. The entire Christian life is hard from beginning to end (cf. 2 Tim. 4:7).

But don't be discouraged.

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<sup>4</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* [London: IVP, 1972], 2:224) writes: "Yes, but still narrower and still straiter; if we really want to come into this way of life, we have to leave our 'self' outside. And it is there of course that we come to the greatest stumbling-block of all. It is one thing to leave the world, and the way of the world; but the most important thing in a sense is to leave our self outside. Yet it is obvious, is it not? We are not to take our self with us on this way. That is not being foolish; it is typical New Testament language. Self is the Adamic man, the fallen nature; and Christ says that he must be left outside. 'Put off the old man', that is, leave him outside the gate. There is no room for two men to go through this gate together, so the old man must be left behind. Every illustration breaks down somewhere, and even this illustration used by our Lord Himself cannot cover the whole truth. There is a sense in which the Christian has not left the old man outside and so needs the exhortation of the apostle to 'put off the old man'. Nevertheless we are told at the very outset that self has no place in this kingdom."

You are not walking alone on this narrow and hard path, but the Lord Jesus is the good shepherd who leads us, and he will not allow any of his sheep to perish along the way (John 10:28; cf. Ps. 23).

<pause>

Third, *many* go the wide and easy way. Everybody seems to be doing it. It's what is deemed as "normal" and "common sense." It gets you the most approval, acceptance, and praise from others. It's the road most travelled.

But *few* go or even find the narrow and hard way. Great crowds are going the other way, and you hardly see anyone going this way. It's what is deemed as "strange" and "out of touch with reality"—or even "dangerous" and "wrong." It gets you criticism, rejection, and even hostility from others. It's the road less travelled.

This is one of the reasons that, in God's good design, he gathers believers into local churches.

Left to ourselves, isolated from church, the pressure and persuasion of the "many" in the world often sway us to adopt their values and vices. We begin to think that the world is normal and Christianity is strange—and eventually, we look just like the world. Just tasteless salt—light under a basket.

But when we're living life-on-life with fellow believers in the church, when we're regularly sitting under God's word reminding us of who he is, who he's made us to be, what he's promised, where we're headed—we again remember that even though we may be "few," we're not alone. We are citizens of the kingdom of heaven, and we're just pilgrims on our journey to our heavenly home together.

<pause>

Fourth, and most importantly, the wide and easy way leads to *destruction*. It may have been easy throughout, but it's the jacuzzi that boils the frog. It's the fumes that lulls you to sleep and then kills you. The ultimate, eternal, irreversible destination is hell.

But the narrow and hard way leads to *life*. It may have been hard throughout, but it's just the contraction pains before the baby's birth. It's the cross before the crown. The ultimate, eternal, irreversible destination is heaven.

It is foolish not to consider the destination. The path is not the end in itself, but we must know where it leads.

God's word says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death" (Prov. 14:12; 16:25).

There are not many paths to heaven. Jesus is emphatically clear that there is only *one* path that leads to life everlasting—and that is through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Jesus said, "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture" (John 10:9). He also said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6; cf. Acts 4:12).

If we truly believe that, then to say that there's *no* difference between Christianity and any other religion, that *all* ways lead to heaven, is the most unloving *lie* that you can speak to another person.

In our evangelism, we must be as clear as Jesus was here. There are only two paths we can take, and only one leads to life.

This must be clear for us as believers as well.

The entire Christian life is hard; we must know that it leads to life everlasting (cf. John 10:10).

The apostle Paul said that “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18), and that “this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17).

That doesn’t diminish any of our hardships, but it magnifies the glory to come.

How great must heaven be if even the worst sufferings on earth are only “light” and “momentary” in comparison!

<pause>

So first, enter by the narrow gate; and the second exhortation is...

## II. Beware of false teachers (vv. 15-20)

Look at verses 15-20.

[<sup>15</sup> “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup> You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.]

In verse 15, Jesus gives a warning: “beware of false prophets [or false teachers].”

And they come in “sheep’s clothing,” meaning that they *look* like Christians. They seem to be credible teachers of God’s word.

“But inwardly [they] are ravenous wolves.” They’re not genuine Christians. They’re dangerous. They will do great harm to the sheep.

Throughout the rest of the passage, a key theme that Jesus will repeatedly emphasize is *subtlety*.

Perhaps many of us tend to think of false teachers as being very *obvious* to spot. But Jesus’ whole point here is that they look like *sheep*. They’re *not* easy to spot. And that’s particularly why they’re so dangerous. They’re *hard* to recognize.

The false teachers will come from *within* the church—they will *look* like sheep and everyone will *think* they’re sheep, but they’re actually “ravenous wolves” who will draw people away from the truth (Acts 20:29-30; cf. 2 Pet. 2:1-3; 2 Cor. 11:13-15).

These false teachers *twist* Scripture to make it say something *different* than what God’s word actually says.

There are many ways this occurs:

- They quote verses out of context,
- they cherry pick passages to the neglect of others,
- they reinterpret words to mean something very different than what the biblical authors meant by them,
- they use subjective, emotional and experiential appeals to make their points rather than the clear grammatical-historical logic of God’s word.

Offentimes, it’s not so much that they’re saying anything *wrong* but it’s what they’re *not* saying. They’re *omitting* vital truths.

The one truth that they seem to spend the most time on is God’s love, but they have little to nothing to say about God’s holiness, our sin, God’s judgment, our need for repentance, church discipline, the reality of an eternal hell.

Jesus talked *more* about God's coming judgment and the reality of hell than he talked about *heaven*—because he wanted to lovingly *warn* us. He tells us the *truth* about reality.

False prophets or false teachers omit these “hard to accept” truths from God's word.

The *true* prophet Jeremiah described the *false* prophets of his day as saying “‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jer. 6:14; 8:11).

They assure you that God is not that holy, sin is not that serious, repentance isn't really necessary, there is no final judgment—there's really nothing to worry about.

But without the understanding that God is holy, sin is serious, repentance is necessary, and the reality of final judgment then what did Jesus really accomplish on the cross? What are we saved from if sin isn't that serious and there's no final judgment?

As you're listening to teachers of God's word, a helpful question to ask is: If an unbeliever sat under this teaching for a month, would the gospel be clear enough for them to respond and be saved?

<pause>

The gospel is the good news of salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ.

God created us and we are accountable to him. But we've all sinned against him—we've all rejected his word and chosen to go our own way.

And because he is holy and just, he must punish us for our sins against him.

But in his love, God came in the person of Jesus Christ to be our substitute. He exchanged *his* life for *ours*. He gave us *his* perfect righteousness, and he bore the punishment we deserved for *our* sins. His death on the cross fully satisfied God's justice, and his resurrection three days later proved the truth of who he is and the salvation he accomplished.

There's nothing left to be done to earn salvation, but Christ has done it all and he offers it as a free gift.

The only way to receive this salvation is by repenting of our sins and trusting in Christ alone for the forgiveness of sins, eternal life in him, and entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

No amount of good works could ever earn this salvation, but it is accomplished and given by God's grace alone through faith in Christ alone.

*That's* the gospel.

If you're *not yet* a believer in Jesus Christ, we want that message of salvation to be crystal clear for you. And we pray that you would respond to Jesus with such repentance and faith to receive this life-changing, eternity-altering gift of salvation *today*.

<pause>

So aside from *not* making that gospel clear in their teaching, how do you recognize these subtle, false teachers?

In verse 16-20, Jesus says, “you will recognize them by their fruits.” Grapes don't come from thornbushes and figs don't come from thistles. So eventually, their fruit will show what kind of tree they really are. You'll begin to see the thorns. Their diseased teaching will show itself in their lives.

And in verse 19, Jesus tells us what will happen to such false teachers: they will be “cut down and thrown into the fire.”

It doesn't matter how big their ministry was, it doesn't matter if they were never discovered to be a false teacher in their lifetime. Jesus says that they cannot escape the final judgment.

<pause>

Notice, Jesus *expects* that his disciples will be able to recognize false teachers by their fruit. That's why he's telling this to us.

And in Matthew 18, Jesus explicitly gives the *entire* congregation the responsibility of *removing* such people from the church. In Galatians 1, it's not the *leaders'* but it's the *congregation's* responsibility to recognize and remove such false teachers from the church. They ought not to listen to them.

It takes time to see the fruit, but it *will* eventually show. But we need to know the Bible well enough and we need to see their lives close enough to be able to make this judgment as a church. This is the responsibility of the *entire* church.

Never become so spiritually lax that you just trust every preacher or every person with a theological degree. Just because someone has certain credentials or is a gifted preacher doesn't mean that the content of his message is the true gospel.

Don't just look for the *gifts* of the Spirit but look for the *fruit* of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

Listen to their message discerningly and observe their lives discerningly (Heb. 13:7).

<pause>

Brothers and sisters, if you're a member of our church, you need to know that, even if we as elders ever teach you something different than the true gospel you first believed, then you have the God-given responsibility to fire us and discipline us out of the church.

Do it for the sake of your own soul, our souls, and the souls of all those who will come after you in this church.

<pause>

So first, enter the narrow gate; second, beware of false teachers; and the third exhortation is...

### III. Beware of self-deception (vv. 21-23)

Look at verses 21-23.

[<sup>21</sup> "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup> On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' <sup>23</sup> And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.']

Here, Jesus gives another warning. Not only can you be deceived by false teachers, but you can also be self-deceived into thinking that you're a Christian—when you're not at all.

Two declarations are made here.

- In verses 21-22, false Christians declare their faith in Christ on the day of judgment.
- And in verse 23, Jesus declares the most terrifying words anyone could ever hear on that final day: "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."

So what do we make of this? Here are three warnings for us.

First, you can have correct doctrine and still not be a Christian.

In verse 21, to acknowledge Jesus as "Lord" is right and true.

Nobody can enter the kingdom of heaven without acknowledging Jesus as “Lord” or “King” over their lives (1 Cor. 12:3; Luke 6:46).

But even the demons acknowledge Jesus respectfully as the “Son of God” (Matt. 8:29). “Even the demons believe—and shudder” (James 2:19). Yet they are not saved.

<pause>

Second, you can have passionate feelings and still not be a Christian.

In verse 21, notice the repetition of the word “Lord.” They say, “Lord, Lord.”

It’s not just an intellectual assent to certain doctrines, but they have an emotional response towards Jesus. Their feelings are involved.

To have strong feelings towards Jesus is right and fitting.

Nobody can enter the kingdom of heaven devoid of affection for Jesus (1 Pet. 1:8; 1 Cor. 16:22).

But strong feelings for Jesus are not enough to be saved.

Feelings can be stirred up by the powerful eloquence of a speaker, by the emotional pull of music, by the overall environment.

People get very moved at a Taylor Swift concert. They get overwhelmed with emotions and begin to weep. The powerful performance, the compelling music, and the atmosphere of dimmed lights and a consumed audience all contribute to having our feelings drawn out.

But that’s not the work of the Holy Spirit.

Likewise, you can cry and raise your hands during worship songs, and you can respond to a spontaneous altar call to follow Jesus—and none of that gives you assurance that you’re *really* a Christian.

You *might* be ... but time will tell if genuine conversion has taken place.

If the tree is healthy, then fruit will be evidenced over time in a person’s life—or as verse 21 says, we will do the will of our Father who is in heaven.

<pause>

Third, you can do amazing works in Jesus’ name and still not be a Christian.

In verse 22, look at this impressive list—they prophesied in Jesus’ name, they cast out demons in Jesus’ name, and they did *many* mighty works in Jesus’ name.

In their minds, it was all for Jesus; they did it all “in [his] name.”

But look at the sobering words that Jesus says to them in verse 23: “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.”

How could this be?

This shows us that it’s not *just* about what we do externally either.

When Jesus says, “you workers of lawlessness,” he means that their hearts were far from him. They didn’t do those things for *him*, but they were doing them for *themselves*.

Jesus already said this earlier. You can practice your righteousness—like giving, praying, and fasting—which *seem* to be for God, and yet do it all to please yourself (Matt. 6:1-18).

And here, you can prophesy, cast out demons, and do many mighty works in Jesus' name—and yet, not do it for Jesus at all but for yourself.

In the Old Testament, think of the pagan prophet Balaam who, at one point, prophesied true things—but was not saved (Num. 22-24; 31:16; cf. 2 Pet. 2:15; Rev. 2:14).

In the New Testament, think of Judas who was among Jesus' twelve apostles who, at one point, cast out demons and did many mighty works in Jesus' name—but was not saved (Matt. 10:1-8; John 6:70-71; 12:6; 17:12).

Doing amazing works even in Jesus' name does not give you any assurance that you're really a Christian.

You can do a lot of Christian activity—serving on ministry teams, leading Bible studies, evangelizing the lost, being sent out to the missions field—and you can be doing it devoid of a personal saving relationship with Jesus.

<pause>

So if we can be so self-deceived, how can anyone have any real assurance that they're a Christian at all?

Here are two biblical ways to be assured that we must not neglect.

First, regular self-examination.

2 Corinthians 13:5 says, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith."

2 Peter 1:10 says, "be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election."

1 John provides three tests to confirm that we are genuine believers—there's the *doctrinal* test (what you believe about Christ), the *relational* test (how you love fellow Christians), and the *ethical* test (how you fight to kill sin and live holy lives).

Whenever we take the Lord's Supper as a church, God's word tells us to "examine [ourselves]" first (1 Cor. 11:28).

Clearly, God wants us to not just *profess* faith, but to *examine* our faith.

False teachers and false churches would discourage you from self-examination. They tell you to fix your eyes on Jesus, and that any kind of self-examination expresses doubt or unbelief.

Now, there may be a certain *unhealthy* self-absorption to avoid, where we're *only* looking at ourselves and *not* looking at Jesus—and of course, we don't want to fall into that extreme.

But to avoid regular self-examination is not only *contrary* what Scripture teaches us to do, but it is making yourself *susceptible* to self-deception.

So that's the first biblical way to find assurance—regular self-examination.

<pause>

Second, meaningful church membership.

The New Testament assumes that *if* you are a Christian, then you *will* be a member of a local church.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Jesus established the local church, and all the apostles did their ministry through it. The entire book of Acts shows us what the apostles understood Jesus' Great Commission to mean. Making disciples was not simply personal evangelism and discipleship

Part of the reason for that is because of what church membership *affirms* for that person.

It isn't just about having a person's name added to a membership directory, but when we extend church membership to someone, we as a whole church are saying, "To the best of our ability and knowledge as a church, we affirm that this person gives a credible profession of faith—we have confidence that they're a Christian."

And church *discipline* is the flip side of that, where we're saying, "To the best of our ability and knowledge as a church, by their serious, outward, and unrepentant sin, we can no longer, in good conscience, affirm that this person gives a credible profession of faith—we no longer have confidence that they're a Christian."

Without the practice of church discipline, church membership really isn't meaningful because it functionally affirms nothing.

At the very least, meaningful church membership means that...

- we're gathering regularly with our church;
- we know others in the church and they know us personally;
- and we're intentionally helping over another follow Jesus together.

That's God's good design for us to grow in our faith and to have assurance in our faith.

<pause>

So first, enter the narrow gate; second, beware of false teachers; third, beware of self-deception; and the fourth exhortation is...

#### **IV. Build on the right foundation (vv. 24-29)**

Look at verses 24-27.

[<sup>24</sup> "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. <sup>26</sup> And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. <sup>27</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."]

Here, Jesus gives one final illustration to end his entire Sermon on the Mount, urging his listeners to build their lives on the foundation of his word—which implies not simply listening and admiring his word but believing and committing their whole lives to live out all of it.

In the illustration, he contrasts two men—a wise man and a foolish man. But before looking at their differences, let's first look at three similarities between them.

First, both men have *heard* Jesus' words. You could say that they were both given the same instructions for how to build a *house*—which is a metaphor for building their *lives*.

Second, both men *desired* to build a house. They both wanted a place where they could live and feel secure.

Third, both men experienced the *same* forces against their houses. Perhaps they were built right next to each other, so that the *same* rain, floods, and winds beat on their houses.

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in a vacuum, but disciples of Christ were publicly affirmed as such through baptism into local churches, where they continued to be taught to obey all that Jesus commanded. The apostle Paul did not just make disciples on his missionary journeys, but he planted local churches in every city. Many of the New Testament letters are written directly to local churches. The Pastoral Epistles include biblical qualifications for local church elders and deacons, and they give specific instructions for how we are to live out our followership of Christ together in a local church (1 Tim. 3:15). In the book of Revelation, Jesus writes letters to seven local churches.

In many ways, you can't tell these two men apart.

So again, notice the *subtlety*. Jesus is not talking about a clear believer and a clear unbeliever. He's describing two people, who on the surface, seem almost identical. Perhaps they're even members of the same church. These are two people who are *convinced* that they're Christians—and externally, they're hard to tell apart.

<pause>

Now, let's look at their two differences.

First, they had different foundations.

The wise man built his house on the rock. It doesn't matter if he was a good architect or not; he just simply followed the instructions given to him by Jesus—not being swayed by what the other guy was doing, even though the other guy probably built his house faster.

But the foolish man built his house on the sand. He didn't do it out of ignorance because he heard Jesus' words just like the wise man, but out of neglect.

But why did he not heed or put into practice what Jesus said?

We don't know for sure, but perhaps out of hurry and impatience. Following Jesus' instructions would take longer and require more effort.

Or perhaps he looked around and saw other people building their houses on the sand, and he thought it was a shortcut worth taking.

Or perhaps he simply thought he knew better than Jesus in how a house ought to be built. Jesus' instructions didn't feel natural or logical to him.

Whatever the reason or excuse he may have had, the fact is that he chose to build his house on *sand* rather than the *rock* of Jesus' words.

And that leads us to the next difference.

<pause>

Second, they had different consequences.

The wise man's house remained standing even through the storms.

Verse 25 says that “the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did *not* fall, *because* it had been founded on the rock.”

But the foolish man's house collapsed when the storms came.

Verse 27 says that “the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it *fell*, and *great* was the fall of it.”

*Great* was the fall of his house. It wasn't just his roof or door that flew off, but his *entire* house—the very place that he lived and felt secure—collapsed. The way Jesus describes it, you can almost hear the crash.

How devastating it must have been for the foolish man!

The only difference between the two houses was their foundations, but *that* was the only difference that truly mattered.

<pause>

So what do we make of all this?

This is Jesus' loving warning for *everyone* to examine their foundations *now* before the storms come and it's too late.

If your foundation has *not* been God's word—if it's been the sand of your own wisdom or worldly values—then you want to recognize that *now*.

Repent and *rebuild* your foundations on God's word *today*.

Believe God's word instead of trusting yourself or what you can immediately see.

Even though it may require more time, effort, and sacrifice, God's way is always best and truly the most secure.

What good is a fancy house that will collapse on the day of the storm?

<pause>

How devastating it would be to have your house—or your life—collapse on the day of judgment, when it's too late.

How terrifying it will be to hear those words from the Lord Jesus, "depart from me" and be cast into hell.

It is God's *grace* to warn you as he does. Don't wait for the storms. Jesus gives this illustration, so that you will choose wisely *now* so that your house will stand in the day of the storm.

And so, Jesus ends his Sermon on the Mount on that *negative* note.

He doesn't assure them that everything's going to be ok. He doesn't give them any words of comfort. But he leaves them with a stark warning.

He intends to leave us feeling uneasy and unsettled *until* we make a choice. We cannot sit on the sidelines just listening and admiring his teaching.

Either we follow him through the narrow and hard path that leads to life, or we reject him to follow the world through the wide and easy path that leads to destruction.

Those are the only two choices—and the most important choice we could ever make is to truly follow him as his disciple.

<pause>

Even though that's the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew gives us a glimpse into the initial response of the crowds to Jesus' teaching.

Look at verses 28-29.

[<sup>28</sup> And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, <sup>29</sup> for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.]

To be astonished by Jesus' teaching unfortunately doesn't mean that they all believed and followed Jesus as his disciples. That's evident as we continue reading through the Gospel of Matthew.

But here, Matthew shows that the crowds recognized Jesus' *unique* authority.

The scribes would usually teach on the borrowed authority of other teachers. They might say, “Rabbi so-and-so said this, and Rabbi so-and-so said that.” The modern equivalent would be preachers just referencing other well-known teachers of God’s word like Luther, Calvin, Piper, Keller, and so forth.

But Jesus *doesn’t* do that.

The only time he quotes people is to *correct* their misunderstandings of God’s Law.

He rests entirely in his *own* authority for everything he says.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, he says things like...

- “You have heard that it was said... But *I* say to you...” (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44; cf. Matt. 5:18; 6:25);
- and “I have come.... to fulfill [the Law and the Prophets]” (5:17), meaning that all of Scripture is about *him*.

He declares who is blessed and who will be condemned. In fact, he claims to be the Judge on the final day and the arbiter of who enters heaven and hell—and it is entirely on the basis on a person’s relationship with *him*.

And here, he speaks of doing “the will of my Father who is in heaven” in verse 21 as synonymous with, doing “these words of mine” in verse 24, meaning that *Jesus’* word is *God’s* word.

If anybody said these things today, we would think immediately that he’s either a false prophet or a lunatic.

But for Jesus, he was speaking the *truth*, for that’s *exactly* who he is.

## Conclusion

As we close, rather than comforting us too quickly with the gospel, I want to leave us with the same uncomfortable warning that Jesus left his disciples with here.

Don’t assume that you’re a Christian just because you attend church and listen to sermons.

Don’t assume that you’re right with God just because you do Christian activities.

Don’t be deceived by false teachers and don’t be self-deceived.

But examine yourself regularly and be a meaningful member of a local church.

Make sure you’re on the narrow and hard path that leads to life.

Make sure you truly believe God’s word above everything else, and that you’re intentionally conforming every aspect of your life to what he has said.

If Jesus really is who he says he is and has done what he says he’s done and will do what he says he will do, then this is the most important choice you’ll ever make.

By his grace, may we choose him over everything else.

Let’s pray.